Condom Man!

Education Director, Correct HELP

April 1, 2003 By Glen Gaylord

I am a superhero without superpowers. Faster than a speeding bullet? No - I'm more a man of rubber than of steel. My gift? Free condoms, which I distribute (5,000 since November 2001) to gay male inmates at Los Angeles County Jail. For these guys face an enemy more elusive and insidious than the Green Goblin.

If you're a man arrested in LA, and you choose to disclose that you are gay, you will be segregated (for your protection) into one of four barracks-style dormitories holding about 100 inmates each. C'mon in: It's damp, crowded, noisy and smelly. Sex definitely happens in here. You can tell by the two guys cuddling in the condom line or by those who sometimes get away with "tenting" their bunks with a blanket for privacy.

You'd be wrong, though, to assume that prisons supply condoms for protection against my foe, HIV. They don't, because sex is strictly prohibited in jails nationwide. What's more, condoms could be used to strangle someone, jam a lock or be filled with bodily fluids and flung.

But Los Angeles' progressive sheriff, Leroy Baca, broke the mold and decided that the risk of HIV and STDs outweighed the rule against inmates having sex - and that condoms might provide better protection than the latex gloves and Corn Nuts bags prisoners were reduced to using. His staff approached my partner in crime-fighting, Mary Sylla, director of Correct HELP (Corrections HIV Education and Law Project), to, well, help. It made sense that they asked us, because we've long had a respectful working relationship with jail staff.

Sure, there are rubber rules: Don't take condoms out of the housing unit. Don't leave condoms on the floor or in laundry. Don't flush condoms down the toilet. And here's the clincher: Don't get caught having sex.

Ah, yes. You can have a glove, but it's a crime to use it. This is why the Sheriff's Department needs *us* to pass out the condoms. We also have the lovely task of collecting the used items, placed by the inmates in a specially designed biohazard container. And no, we don't count them, but thanks for asking!

Each week, I swing into the jail to dispense my magic. The inmates queue up, get a dollop of HIV information - and a condom. Every now and then someone says, "I'm a slut. I'll need five!" Sorry,

guys. For now, it’s one per week.

Giving a lifesaving device to people who aren’t allowed to use it? It is my blessing. It is my curse. But it feels great to walk into their dorm and hear them shout out my name. Who am I, you ask? I am Condom Man!

Prisoners nationwide can contact Correct HELP: PO Box 46276, West Hollywood, CA 90046; or call the HIV Inmate Hotline collect (323.822.3838).

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